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From the Same Branch

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Poetry

by

Aurielle C. Destiche

B.A. San Diego State University, 2008

August 2014

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During my semester in Ireland this past summer, I took a class called Form and Idea with Tony French. The course's open format (no real syllabus, no power points, and class discussions rather than lectures) allowed my mind to wander and make connections it otherwise may not. I was able to generate new ideas or bring a new perspective to an old one, such as a stale poem or my personal definition of art. In a month crammed full of classes, readings, and homework, I enjoyed the opportunity French's class provided, namely, the opportunity to sit, think, and discuss, with no specific objective in mind. During the course, we wrote a few short essays including one in response to philosopher Rollo May's definition of creativity: "Creativity is the encounter of the intensively conscious human being with his or her world." For the first time in my writing career, I had to think about my process. When I was as young as fourteen, I took mental notes in certain situations (facial expressions, plants, trinkets, smells) knowing later I would want to recall such details for a poem. More than a decade later, this practice is alive and well in my poetry: in "The Writer and the Developer" I use word-for-word dialogue as in the opening line: "I wish I could make it up to you. Can I send you flowers? Or a sybian?" For me, an *encounter* is more than just an experience, it is an interaction or exchange and *intensively conscious* describes the heightened awareness with which every encounter is approached. These subjectively conscious experiences, or encounters, act as creative impetuses. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered how these creative impetuses become creative works.

My process has been influenced by my spirituality and meditation. Before I even knew what meditating was, my mother would say, "Just sit back and take a deep breath." For as long as I can remember, she emphasized the importance of waiting and letting the initial wave of emotion subside. Both my parents were raised in the Midwest as strict Catholics. They left the church at 18, moved to San Diego, and each conglomerated into some kind of Buddhist, Taoist,

metaphysical, hippie. When I was growing up, their individualities made me feel a separation between myself and others, and sometimes I wondered why my parents couldn't just be "normal." As I got older, I not only embraced their unique personalities, but even found myself reading things, such as the *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tsu, before saying my prayers and going to sleep. Taking up meditating has impacted all aspects of my life, especially writing. My mother's advice in combination with mindfulness meditation gives me time to digest an encounter before incorporating it in my poetry. The stillness allows for an uncorking of the experience and removes me from my poetry so that when I am ready, I can approach the subject without the attachment to specific language or phrasing that can sometimes interfere.

The distance is most noticeable through my use of figurative language, which wins out over literal language in many instances. Meditation helps calm my mind allowing me to approach the encounter--the shapes, colors, tastes, smells—with new insight. Often, what ends up on paper are not literal images and details from an encounter, but associations that come to mind when I think back on it. For instance, the lines from "Phantoms" were generated while reflecting on an experience while sitting outside near a lemon tree in my old backyard: "something I recognize on the backside of my eyes/a map I made, I burned, I taped back together" and "break the atmosphere and it's a beetle's wing from there/I am a derailed memory sitting/atop rotting lemons in the grove."

As important as heightened awareness is, without stillness and the ability to let the mind wander the creative impetus cannot evolve. In our culture, it seems, we always have to be *in motion*: getting somewhere, getting work done, checking off the to-do list that only exists in perpetuity. We buy into this idea that somehow being over-extended makes us more important, more valuable, more of a contributor to whatever we think we contribute to. But what about the

sacrifice? What gets squeezed out when our so-called obligations overlap? For me, being quiet is an essential part of any writer's work. Not only is reflection generative, but revision also happens in the quiet space when it's the only thing to concentrate on. Where can this poem possibly go? How might it explode? What goes? What stays? The answers usually come when I am not looking at or even thinking about a piece.

As I write this, the preface for my thesis (which we could essentially label as job number one), I am balancing three other jobs. I know that despite not having enough time in a day to sleep, I have to--*have to*--find time to sit and clear my mind. If nagging thoughts sneak in trying to persuade me something pressing needs my attention, I push them out. When I see the post-it on my bathroom mirror that says "meditate," I usually take ten minutes to follow its command. When meditating isn't possible, I daydream to stoke my creativity. In a busy world, I take the quiet where I can get it. Sometimes that means getting in a great workout then sitting in the sauna and closing my eyes till my body decides it needs a reprieve from the heat. Other days, it's curling up in my favorite chair and watching the leaves outside move in the wind.

The subjects so often written about--childhood, love, parents, death, and seasons--lend themselves to both reflection as well as figurative language. Maybe using figurative language was born from a need to deal with difficult things indirectly. Most likely, our desire to create stems from multiple sources. I grew up at my little, yellow, plastic table by the big window in the living room with my paper and crayons and a mother who encouraged me to be creative. Once, she cut my hair and I decided to glue it to my characters so they would have hair just like mine. When I was in kindergarten, I colored a Halloween picture of a witch and a cat in only purple and red because those were my favorite colors and I wanted my picture to reflect me. My teacher held it up in front of class as an example of what not to do, which probably contributed to

my excessive shyness and lack of class participation, but it may well have been the first moment I consciously identified with my own creativity.

Whether I want to relax, seek inspiration, or just can't get a certain poem out of my head, I am always drawn to the seamless integration of figurative and literal in the work of Li-Young Lee and Erica Miriam Fabri. I want to write poems people go back to. I want to write poems people can relate to and poems people can lose themselves in. When a reader enters *From the Same Branch*, my hope is these words will feel good on the tongue, will please the ear, and will pull the reader in time and time again.

Modern Life

Spanish classes took “cultural”
field trips across the border
to practice *volcabulario nuevo*
y usar conjugaciones diferentes.
Students learned to appreciate
a home with four walls
made from more than just corrugated
metal, plywood, and plastic.
But were disgusted
when they threw used toilet paper
en la basura because the plumbing
wasn’t first world. Seniors in the class
took down names of clubs
and bars that offered all day
two-for-one tequila shots.
The school bus always left
before it got too dark for *los gringos*
to feel too bad about children
selling chicle between the lanes of cars
inching toward the border.

Children like the one taken
from his mother’s fruit-stand
in a Mexico City barrio by family
friends looking for quick money.
He was kept for three days,
but when his family couldn’t pay
and the police began searching,
 they tied him up,
 injected acid into his heart,
 buried him in a hill near the capital.

Untitled

When he first walks in, I don't see him.
My eyes are closed,
or at least they feel that way.

A sigh breaks the quiet and I stop rocking.
As his hands smooth over my shoulders
I become aware of the weight in my arms.

I feel him move in front of us. She goes
with alacrity and the stuffed pink elephant
rattles in her infant hands.

I'm humming through upturned lips,
or at least I think am, possessed,
a sound born only in the throats of women.

Father Figure

In my rear view mirror I see you
standing under Hawthorne branches,
a shadow shifting in the murk
of a street lamp. To your right, wirey
unmowed grass. To your left,
a barren plum tree and dandelion
clocks I used to wish upon.

I look ahead to the peeling paint
on the wooden garage door.
At thirteen, I watched the headlights
of my mother's Buick expand
as she backed out of the driveway. I cried,
not because she was leaving,
not because I thought she might never come back,
but because I couldn't blame her.

You take a deliberate step
so your eyes can find mine in the mirror.
Without looking down, I put the car
in reverse and my foot on the gas.

Mom

I took the kids to school.
I cleaned.
My kids fought with each other.
My husband came home late.

My kids fought with each other.
I burned the pork chops.
We argued over money.
I locked myself in the bathroom.

We argued over money.
My feet wouldn't reach the front door.
I prayed for the first time since Catholic school.
We did not touch.

I prayed for the first time since Catholic school.
My husband stopped coming home.
I got in my car but couldn't leave the driveway.
My daughter looks like me.

Daddy's Girl

Maybe it will be his liver
finally saying *I'm over this crap--*
I'm retiring and taking you with.
When he called from an ambulance
several years ago, I thought for sure
I had guessed right. Maybe
he will be camping, playing chess
with squirrels in Cuyamaca,
and see exactly how he fits
among the stars above the alder, ash, and oaks.

During my early twenties in the yellow
wallpapered laundry room,
that always brought to mind Charlotte Perkins Gilman,
he told me *One day I might leave*
and never come back. All I could do
was stare at him, wondering how long
he'd been waiting to tell me that.

Breakfast

Each morning
I watched the way my father
flipped frying eggs. *It's all in the wrist.*
When he wasn't looking,
I practiced with imaginary eggs
in my imaginary pan.

The other day,
I stood in my friend's kitchen
showing her the right cuts
to dice an onion (half-it lengthwise
through root and top, cut tip and peel,
leave root—it helps hold the onion
together—slice vertically first,
then horizontally). I realized
he was right wanting me to watch
all those times the exact way
to combine ingredients for beurre blanc,
to flour shrimp for scampi,
to mix molasses and wheat germ
into pancake batter so they're as healthy
as they are tasty—
and wishing I had.

Today, for the first time,
he looks old to me.

Tiger Marriage

She used her incisors
to rip off his stripes.
He used his
to bite the cubs.

Apocalypse Apocalypsed Apocalypsing

An armored creature with spiral wings
moves, close and low in a white noise.
We are against ourselves.

Only grey things grow. History clouds
float in parallel seas. We sew kites
in case we ever see the sky again--
in case make believe is all that will grow.

Between wide-eyed bush-legs
let us pray for delicate soul-sparks,
and the yell of knotted long-gone girlhood:
naked, spotted, exposed.

In a vaporetto

charting the Grand Canal
during the midday rush
late in July
il mozzo con voce fortepiano—

per
me
sso.

Tirol

Past the gate,
past the geese in the pond,
past the farm girl
heading to feed the Mangalista pigs,
horned Hebridean sheep meander—
their black curls barely visible
in the early-morning dark.

My face framed
by the small bedroom window,
veiled in early-morning dark,
I watch bleating goats
rush the bread delivery boy.

At the top of the vineyard,
the hill bogards the sun,
but the roosters know—
it's time.

Haiku

Following the wake
cheeks confettied with tissue
your voice last summer.

Quiet Emergency
after Eavan Boland

Sunlight in your apartment
grows mold as you hide
in the cabinet, scared
of how the bottom will feel
when it finally hits.

Outside, isolated
weather patterns grind
and wrinkle over the lake.

Some might call this sinking:
Whole-truths of grief
marked on your arm
you don't even pretend
to conceal anymore.

Choked purple columbine unfolding
newborn stems and wet petals
look in from the window--

watch you sift
blood from bone
like you can put her
pieces back together.

Late at night as you burn
in the dark, the Bush Stone-curlew
wails. It sounds something
like *I'm an only child now*.

Cyclists have taken to the roads.
April, gradually.

August 23

Summer in Chicago sits on my chest. The air
wet, sticky, tastes thick between my teeth.

Warm rain floods the hotel, the roads,
and the short drive to the funeral home takes two hours.

Moving past people who've stood for hours
in sour humidity to see you, the closer I get

the more my body resists until I'm sure
I'm standing still. But you're already in view.

In July at grandpa's funeral, you joked
your wake would last a quarter hour—anyone

who couldn't attend didn't love you enough.
I'm not sure what to say, or what you'd want to hear,

but suspect you're enjoying a good laugh,
so I kiss my fingers and set them to your cheek.

Dear

While eating starlight for breakfast, she writes me a letter. Her tongue can no longer form syllables, but her hands make origami from bellflowers after wringing the petals for ink. She tells me she folds lines into my hair at night to help me remember them in the morning

clementines drop to the bed / your brumal voice opens

She tells me my prayers taste heavy and salty, but she puts them in a vase half-filled with yearning and watches them with affection anyway. Her mouth leaves traces of soil on the stamp.

Seasonal

Pumpkin patches appear at malls. Kids pick out costumes.
He says: Every year when I was little I'd ask why leaves change color.

Crisp winds blow the summer heat from town.
She says: In the morning I watch the leaves change color.

He says: The morning tastes intimate on my tongue--
sweet and delicate as the leaves change color.

She says: The shelters have opened early and I wonder
if the homeless are too hungry to notice the leaves change color.

In front of them, a knobbed branch breaks the autumn sun in two.
He puts his hand on hers. The leaves change color.

And All the Answers Pull Away

We find ourselves here at X marks the spot, and that X turned on its side looks like the slanted cross on our bodies from the grid of the naked window. Fresh clementines drop to the bed as dust particles, floating in trails of light, do the arithmetic of our years.

We yank the morning sky up over our heads to keep the sun in—feeding each other brightness while citrus skins flow over to the floor.

With a tremble hand

I feed you couplets from a beggar tree
as dragonflies rattle in the dark
weaving days formless,
unfastened,
brushing against narrow hands
and sunup. Each word, you say,
floats just out of reach. You ask
if there's a back- up plan, in case
they don't come true.

My throat full of piano keys
can only observe
how far we bury ourselves—
wandering in this deep-sweet—
growing down here
in this tourist Buddha state.

Bardo

If this world doesn't turn you on I will kiss you enchanted with my wine stained mouth. Light bursts color content, graded running hues hurting to use my body. Turret star storms, elevated, uneven, flesh against yours. There's no life beating around us.

We are new.

Backward and shy, there was a time before we were born when we were all made alive.
The grass souged when I fell in as dwindling sun-heat rose, bringing your scent with it,
twirling around till shrub-showers couldn't wash your smell from my hair.
You super-ignited my landscape and I, I ran through the sunken garden behind your eyes.
Flowers ticked tongue beats; the petals moaned your name in the after-dark foliage, scarred
and carefully groomed.

I stole the life from between your legs and hid it between mine transcending in wonder and
dread.

In this space we are infinite.

Kremastos

Palm fronds bent and folded around our hands
in prayer for knotted bursts of color.

History-kites floated from white noise.
Baked bricks fell. Rosewood cracked.

Junipers screamed from their roots.
Terebinth moaned in the after-dark.

Sand grouse made love in the Tigris,
as Rose of Jericho and puschkinia bloomed,
uneven, through our throats.

Phantoms

I am a derailed memory sitting
atop rotting lemons in the grove.
Blades of grass and thought in one hand, carving
false consciousness with the other.

Atop rotting lemons in the grove,
directions to the moon whispered-
by blades of grass and consciousness. One hand carving
something I recognize on the backside of my eyes:

directions to the moon. Whispers
break the atmosphere and it's a beetle's wing from there
sound like something I once recognized
on the backside of my eyes. A map I made,
I chewed, blades of grass wove back together.

Some things I once recognized: lemons
in the grove, and grass, and the backside
of a beetle's wing.

Break the atmosphere and it's a beetle's wing from there
I am a memory burned and taped back together.

The Writer and The Developer
after Erica Miriam Fabri

He said: I wish I could make it up to you. Can I send you flowers? Or a sybian?
She said: If they aren't here by Thursday, we're over.

He said: I want to see you fit that in your mouth.
She said: I sent you a picture. Now rub my belly.

He said: I already did. I scratched and sniffed.
She said: Did you go in for a taste?

He said: I put your sentiments in the oven at 350.
She said: I opened the box expecting a sybian.

He said: I felt it was better than "I love you," but not more true.
She said: Mexican jumping beans scare me.

He said: You think I'm an asshole.
She said: You taste like the caramel stuck in my teeth.

He said: Every night I think about when you stole my shorts.
She said: I always forget your real first name.

He said: Are the sunflowers dying yet?
She said: They tasted bright in my bowl of cereal.

He said: I like them. But I like your face more.
She said: I'm building you something like a poem.

He said: Promise you won't hold anything back.
She said: There's no more room left in me for you.

Even the Roosters Know

By eight o'clock we were delirious--
another day under autumnal sun
through branches of an apple tree.

Doing our best impression,
we were everything at once:
soil, trunk, and leaf. You said
this is ripe as years reflected

in the fallen fruit between us.
Today, like clean tangerine
skin, your eyes shine by the fistful.

Maybe, each ear-marked
to fill ourselves with another.
Without a sound, an apple
hits the ground beneath us.

In Jacklight

Under this barren grapefruit tree,
praise my body.

Tell me
my hard nipples
are sugared walnuts
you eat
by the handful
and my thighs
are rich as baklava
you turn over
and indulge upside down.

Tell me
my tongue
is your huckleberry.

Watch my fingers
move

 between
my own
 legs.

Blades of grass direct you to the moon.

Winter

Under sheets of brumal leaves, your voice opens
as I untangle the gossiping birds flying overhead--
our separate skins can be seen from the windows.
Beloved, there is no escape from this flesh.

As I untangle the gossiping birds flying, overhead,
weeks pass—slowly--in two places.
Beloved, there is no escape from this flesh.
In their gray bellies, my eyes shift the weather.

Weeks pass slowly. In two places,
the world goes on without us.
My eyes shift their grey bellies. The weather,
dual mornings under ocean air, predicts our shelf life.

The world goes on--our separate skins
can be seen from the window's dual mornings.
Birds fly from under sheets of brumal leaves
as your voice opens.

Your brumal voice opens under sheets of leaves.
In slow places, two weeks will pass
as silence, grey and weathered, shifts.
Without us in bed, the world goes.

Ocean air at the window. There is no escape
from the hardness of silence.

Sunflower

In the middle of the night
their cyclops eyes watch me.

I turn uneasily.
Not because of the damp heat
reviving summer in late

October, nor the whirl
of cars outside my window,
but because I can't stop

thinking about the sun
on your body under
the apple tree.

Once, from the first bouquet
you gave me, I ate a petal,

swallowed my breath,
and waited to fill with yellow
just as I'd imagined it.

From the Same Branch
after Li-Young Lee

Because this house is on a hill,
going home is always a climb.
I stop at the top beside a sweet gum tree
as a leaf frees itself from the branch

falling between exhaustion,
cowardice, sticking to the heavy
sweat of my hesitation. From the window
I think my father has seen me.

And it was here one autumn night,
under the molting branches
of this sweet gum tree, I turned
as a page from an old book, knowing

what is left behind, anticipating
what is yet to come. Truth is,
my father is not at the window
and I don't think he's ever seen me.

Between our two worlds, this tree.
In my hands, guilt and grief
while under my feet
sprouting sweet gum seeds.

And between his eyes and mine
scattering sweet gum leaves.

Vita

The author was born and raised in San Diego, California. She received her Bachelor's degree in English from San Diego State University in 2008. In 2012, she joined the University of New Orleans creative writing program as a low-residency MFA student.